

# Diversity Leadership

## Social Networking

### Introduction

While we are all aware that diversity certainly speaks to how we may be different from one another based on race, culture, gender, ethnicity and physical ability, it is also about less visible attributes. Choices we make about our lives such as where and how we live, work, and educate ourselves make us both similar and different from each other. Likewise, what choices we make in adapting to technological environments and to what degree we are able to accept and utilize those changes in environments is a difference we encounter.

This issue of the Diversity Leadership Guide focuses on using social networking technology for communicating, learning, and networking in the workplace. Some of these tools, such as Facebook or MySpace, are most frequently associated with teenagers or college students. Because of this it can be easy to assume that the usefulness of social networks is limited to “socializing”. However, upon closer inspection many of these tools are valuable for increasing productivity and innovation at NASA.

Social Networks are the buzzword in business right now. It can be overwhelming to know where to start. Discuss with your local working group if any of these tools could help the team work better together. Pick just one and try it. The best thing about social networks is ***you can't get it wrong!*** Use trial and error to see what works best for your group. If it is taking more time than it is worth – scrap it and try something else. The ultimate goal is to use something that saves time, increases team communication and information sharing, and harnesses the true value at NASA – the people.

The remainder of this guide will focus on what social networking is, ways that it can benefit you at work, and some example tools for further exploration.

### How Social Networks Work

Online ***social networking*** involves making connections and sharing information with people having a shared interest. Let's look at how social networks function and then some examples.

Social networks ask you to fill in some basic information about yourself in a *profile*. Profiles can be anonymous or include your real name and contact information. This area is also filled with information about your interests, areas of expertise, and other important information. People learn about you from your profile and vice versa. The profile is the building block of most social networks.

Connections are made via *common interests*. For example, you may be the only person in your local work group working with FORTRAN but someone at Ames Research Center is also using the program. In a social network you would be able to find this person because you have both listed FORTRAN as an “interest” or work area. You can connect to people that you might not otherwise know due to *geographic or organizational boundaries*. In a diverse organization like NASA this can be invaluable. Previously, you may have had a network that included only the people in your branch or building; now, with an online network, your sources for contacts are much wider. You can *share information* with your contacts *and receive relevant information in return*. Imagine the difference between spending an hour on Google looking for information or using a recommended source from a trusted contact, saving valuable time. *Information is made more relevant through tagging*. Tagging is the process of assigning keywords to a resource. For example, if you are posting a news story for others in your network to read you can add keywords that will help them find the story and/or decide if it is relevant to them. You can also find *experts in a field*. For example, if you need to work on something you don't know that much about you can use your social network to find people that are well versed in the topic and ask questions, find resources, and learn from your network. This can also be valuable for making connections for collaboration. Further, you can benefit from *stored knowledge*. With person-to-person networking, say a work discussion at the water cooler, there is no capture of the information that was exchanged. With many types of social networks this conversation or information exchange would be captured for future reference or for other network members to find.

Many social networks are valuable tools even without utilizing the social aspect. You can benefit from *organizing your information*. Creating your own online source for your favorite tools, articles, or websites will help you find information more quickly and, since it is web-based, from any computer.

## Types of Social Networks and Examples

**Social Bookmarking.** This type of network is for storing your favorite websites (or “bookmarks”) and sharing them with your network.

- Benefits:
  - All of your bookmarks are easy to find and search on any computer (instead of browsing through your favorites on your web browser).
  - You can find others with similar interests and discover new websites from their collection.
  - You can create tag words to help you and your network find additional information.
- Examples:
  - Delicious (<http://del.icio.us>) - share websites.
  - CiteULike (<http://www.citeulike.com>) - share websites and article citations.
  - Digg (<http://www.digg.com>) - share popular news stories.

**Social News Readers.** News readers aggregate all of the news items from your favorite websites (blogs, news sources, organizations) into one place and allows you to share the information with your network.

- Benefits
  - All of the news is automatically picked up by your news reader. For example, instead of visiting Space News (<http://www.space.com>) every day the news reader collects the information in one place saving you valuable time.
  - News readers allow you to quickly scan headlines and only click on those that interest you for more information.
  - News stories that you find particularly relevant can be shared with your network. You could even add comments to your shared items, e.g. “this is the article I was

talking about at the staff meeting. Read the 3rd paragraph when you get a minute.”

- You can also view items that have been shared to you and discover news stories you might not have otherwise found.
- Examples:
  - Google Reader (<http://www.google.com/reader>)– pull hundreds of news sources into one webpage on Google Reader. Share news items with your network of “friends” on Google.
  - Bloglines (<http://www.bloglines.com>) – pull hundreds of topic specific blogs into one page. Share news items with your network of “friends” on Bloglines.

*Team Collaboration Sites.* These social networks are normally invitation only and have many different types of social interactions within them.

- Types of interaction on Collaboration sites
  - Message boards – provides space for asynchronous discussion about a topic.
  - Polls – quickly and easily get a group consensus.
  - Document Sharing – share working documents and make comments on them.
  - Shared Calendaring – important group dates and events.
  - Announcements – official notices broadcast to everyone.
- Examples:
  - Process Based Mission Assurance (PBMA) (<http://pbma.nasa.gov>) – this is a NASA tool that was developed at Glenn. PBMA is free, password protected, and contains all the tools mentioned above for workgroups. Because it is NASA-wide these groups can be local, across NASA, or even include non-NASA people.
  - Inside NASA Communities of Practice (<http://insidenasa.nasa.gov>) - this is also a NASA tool. For a fee you can set up a NASA only, password protected (optional) site that includes document sharing, message boards, and announcements.

*Blogs and Wikis.* Both blogs and wikis are social websites that focus on a community of participants.

- Blogs – usually a small group of people post news or topics. Other community members may comment on each post creating a lively discussion. Example, Shana Dale’s blog (<http://blogs.nasa.gov/cm/blog/Shana's-Blog/>) (does not currently allow comments); NASA Watch (<http://www.nasawatch.com>)
- Wikis – a webpage that is created and managed by the community. A well-known example is Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia written and maintained by anyone who signs up. Wikis can also be password protected so that only a small group of people can have access.
- Examples:
  - Inside NASA Wiki – (<http://inwiki.nasa.gov>)
  - Wetpaint (<http://www.wetpaint.com>) – make a free wiki for a group (will have advertising).

*Combined Social Networks.* Sites like Facebook combine aspects of other types of social networking sites.

- Benefits:
  - Find contacts with like-minded interests.
  - Join groups based on region, interest, or event.
  - Post links, messages, and comments on other’s profiles.
  - Ask questions and find answers.

- Examples:
  - Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>) - Join the Official NASA Group at <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2208274185>
  - NASA Sphere (still in pilot phase) – NASA is currently looking at a NASA-only social network. This is similar to Facebook but built with a business purpose in mind.

*Instant Messaging.* Create contacts and communicate in real-time with them.

- Benefits:
  - Availability awareness – by looking at your contacts, often called a buddy list, you can see who is available to answer a question and who is busy. Likewise you can use your status to indicate your availability. E.g. On the Phone, Away, Out to Lunch, etc.
  - Quick communication – in general the more complex an issue the lower tech the communication medium should be. Instant Messaging is good for quick and informal answers. For example; “are you free at 1PM for a meeting?” or “Did you order the \_\_\_\_?” More complex issues should use email or phone. And face-to-face is best for the most complex discussions.
  - Multitasking – although it is difficult to do two things while on the phone, while you are messaging someone you can be working on something else while the other person is responding.
- Examples:
  - NASA has an agency-wide Instant Messaging tool called Microsoft Messenger. It should be on your computer already. For help setting it up contact the ODIN helpdesk. Once you are set up you can add contacts from any center and begin communicating. (GRC Library's guide to IM etiquette at work: <http://nasa-grc.libguides.com/content.php?pid=11399>)

Through social networking there is the probability of opening yourself to a global network of learning, communicating, and working that until this Century has eluded us as a society. The diversity inherent in just the decision to reach out to a broader society, or not, is worthy of dialogue. To learn how to broaden our electronic horizons if interested and share that experience with others is another layer. There are several opportunities to utilize social networking as a marketing and educational tool for NASA Glenn.

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### Ideas for Dialogue

1. Have you been using social networks and were not even aware of it? (i.e. NASA Watch is a blog, Amazon.com uses tagging and customer reviews to recommend products, some groups use eRoom or Sharepoint for sharing documents.) How can social networks be used in our organization? Why would we want to use them? Why not?
2. How do different generations feel about social networking? What can we learn from each perspective?
3. How can the NASA mission be affected by leveraging social networks?
4. What are the major obstacles to utilizing social networks? How can these challenges be overcome?